

Turkey and Armenia Move to Bury the Hatchet (ARI)

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Theme: Turkey and Armenia, backed by the US and Russia, agreed a framework on 23 April 2009 to normalise their relations and end one of the most intractable disputes left from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in support of its ally Azerbaijan, which was in conflict with Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Summary: Abdullah Gül, Turkey's President, kicked off the rapprochement with Armenia with some football diplomacy. In September 2008 he watched a World Cup qualifying game between Turkey and Armenia in Yerevan, the Armenian capital. It was the first-ever visit by a Turkish President to Armenia and broke the ice. Resolving the dispute between the two countries, however, requires a great deal of political will and compromise on both sides as their positions are very entrenched. The thorniest issue is how to address the 1915 massacre of up to 1.5 million Armenians, which Armenia and its diaspora label genocide, a term that Turkey virulently refuses to accept. The other major issue is to what extent the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has to be resolved before diplomatic relations are restored and the border opened. The economies of both countries, but particularly landlocked Armenia's, would benefit from normal relations. And Turkey's bid to become a full member of the EU, moving at a snail's pace, would receive a boost as one more obstacle would be removed. Open borders is an EU membership requirement. This is particularly important this year as there is a deadline for Turkey to normalise relations with the Greek Cypriots, something that requires resolution of or, at least, progress on Cyprus, the Mediterranean island partitioned between Greek and Turkish Cypriots after Turkey's invasion in 1974.

Analysis:

The agreement between Turkey and Armenia, after secret talks in Switzerland for almost two years, came one day before Barack Obama was due to give the annual 24 April statement by US Presidents on the issue of the killing of Armenians. Obama, to the relief of the Turkish government, refrained from branding the massacre a genocide, breaking a campaign promise while contending that his views about the slaughter had not changed. Instead, in a written statement, he called it 'one of the great atrocities of the 20th century'. The fact that the agreement came on the eve of the statement suggested that Turkey had reached the accord with Armenia to discourage Obama from using the G-word. Earlier, on 6 April, Obama had made Turkey the first European and Muslim country he visited on a bilateral basis, emphasising the strategic importance for his Administration of the nation

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and reflecting his policy of reaching out during his first 100 days in office to the Islamic world. Had Obama used the G-word it would have inflamed Turkey and undoubtedly undone all the goodwill created during his visit.

Figure 1. Turkey and Armenia



Source: Financial Times.

Turkey was the first country after the US to recognise Armenia in December 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The railway between its border town of Kars and the Armenian town of Gyumri was opened and electricity was provided. In 1992, Turkey led efforts to give Armenia a founding seat in an Istanbul-based regional grouping, the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and Azerbaijan was also given a seat (see the chronology in the Annex). Levon Ter-Petrosian, the first President of Armenia, sought to normalise relations with Turkey, but Ankara did not take up the opportunity to establish diplomatic relations and when the Nagorno-Karabakh war erupted in 1993 it closed the rail link as part of the sanctions when Armenia captured the Kelbajar district of Azerbaijan.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute

The rivalry for control of Nagorno-Karabakh (see Figure 2) between ethnic Armenians and Azeris dates back well over a century into competition between Christian Armenian and Muslim Turkic and Persian influences. The Soviet Union incorporated the territory, populated for hundreds of years by Armenian and Turkic farmers, herdsman and traders, into Azerbaijan in 1923. In December 1991, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, a referendum held there and in the neighbouring district of Shahumian resulted in a declaration of independence from Azerbaijan as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), which is still unrecognised by any country including Armenia. In the final years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region became a source of dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Up to 30,000 people were killed and more than one million fled their homes.

Nagorno-Karabakh is legally part of Azerbaijan but has been controlled by ethnic Armenians since the war ended in 1994. Armenians have also occupied large tracts of Azeri territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Officials from Armenia and Azerbaijan have been holding talks, mediated by the Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with little success.

Figure 2. Nagorno-Karabakh



Source: The BBC.

Turkey has strong relations with Azerbaijan based on trade, shared oil and gas pipelines and a sense of common destiny in an ethnic, cultural and linguistic Turkic world. Azerbaijan is oil rich and Turkey very energy dependent. Turkey was the first country to recognise Azerbaijan after it declared independence in 1991. In 2008, the two countries exchanged 10 state visits at the Presidential and Prime Ministerial level. The close relations are underscored by the saying 'one nation, two states'. The relationship has an important strategic dimension in the form of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (which runs just 10 miles from the ceasefire line), the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project which is under construction.¹

The first government of Azerbaijan in 1992-93 was led by Abulfaz Elchibey, a keen supporter of greater Turkic links. These relations have so far conditioned Turkey-Armenia normalisation as Ankara has always insisted on Armenia's withdrawal from occupied Azerbaijani territories as a precondition for opening the border and establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia. In the eyes of Armenia, Turkey's policy is hostage to its relations with Azerbaijan.

Baku has let it be known that if this condition is lifted, it might restrict Turkey's participation in the expansion of Azerbaijani oil and gas exports. Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's President, cancelled his attendance at the summit meeting in Istanbul of the 'Alliance of Civilisations' (sponsored by Turkey and Spain) on 6-7 April, apparently because Ankara did not confirm or deny media reports of de-linkage.

It is unclear whether Ankara's position has changed. It is caught between a rock and a hard place. Turkish analysts believe it is unlikely that Ankara would accept a total de-linking of the two issues. Also, Armenia would not want to publicly and explicitly negotiate Nagorno-Karabakh with Turkey, but may nevertheless understand that progress with Turkey depends on some withdrawal. If there is no change at all in Armenian occupation this would hinder Ankara's efforts to normalise relations. Armenia could withdraw from some *rayons* (Kelbecer) but not all (Lacin) of them.

¹ Azerbaijan, enriched by energy revenues, has the fastest-growing military budget in the world and spends more on weapons than Armenia spends on its entire stated budget. See 'Lay to rest the Ghosts of Conflict in the Caucasus' by Thomas de Waal (*Financial Times*, 5/VI/2009).

The Issue of What to Call the 1915 Killing of Up to 1.5 Million Armenians

Nothing enflames passions in Turkey more than the 1915 destruction of the Armenian communities of Anatolia, and the question of whether it constituted genocide.² Only recently, as a result of the democratisation aided by Turkey's process of seeking to join the EU, has the issue begun to be discussed relatively freely and without incurring criminal charges.³ In the highest-profile case, Orhan Pamuk, the 2006 Nobel laureate for literature, almost landed himself in jail in January of that year for publicly degrading the Turkish nation after he referred to the killing of Armenians and Kurds in an interview he gave to a Swiss newspaper and appeared in court after he was charged by an ultra-nationalist judge.⁴ The case was dropped.

The official Turkish view, ground into schoolchildren from an early age, is that the Armenian population was responsible for what happened by siding with Russia during World War I. The Ottoman authorities, according to the narrative set in stone by the Turkish Historical Society, set up in the 1930s, responded with mass deportation of the Armenian population.⁵ The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire.

Resolutions commemorating the 1915 genocide have been passed by more than 20 parliaments, including France and Germany whose current governments are not in favour of Turkey's full EU membership. The US Congress was on the point of voting on a non-binding resolution condemning the Armenian genocide in September 2007, but called it off at the last minute because of fears of how Turkey would react and the impact on the already strained US-Turkey relations (over Iraq). President Barack Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi are all on record for calling the massacre a genocide.⁶ Obama stopped short of calling it a genocide when he addressed the Turkish parliament in April and when he gave the traditional White House statement on 24 April commemorating the atrocities.⁷ His avoidance of the word outraged the Armenian diaspora around the world, principally in the US, Russia, France and Lebanon, which is estimated to be twice as big as the population of Armenia (3 million) and is much more vociferous on the genocide issue.

² This section draws on *Noah's Dove Returns: Armenia, Turkey and the Debate on Genocide* published by the European Stability Initiative on 21 April 2009

(www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=108) and *Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders*, published by the International Crisis Group on 14 April 2009 (www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6053).

³ An important reform in 2003 turned the National Security Council (NSC) into a purely consultative body with a civilian majority. The NSC, particularly since the coup in 1980, served as a conduit for the powerful military to express its views on a broad range of policy matters. As regards freedom of expression, the infamous article 301 of the Penal Code has been amended.

⁴ Kemal Kerincsiz, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Grand Union of Jurists, said Pamuk's Nobel prize was 'a reward for the lies he says about the so-called genocide... It is all part of Europe's plot to partition Turkey, as they did 90 years ago. They want to give our land to Armenians, Kurds and Greeks. Pamuk and the Europeans he loves so much are the enemies of Turkey'.

⁵ Yusuf Halacoglu, its Director, referred in a document in 2006 to '519,000 Muslims the Armenians killed' and said 'most Armenians died from disease... those who were slaughtered were about 8-10,000 according to the numbers we obtained'.

⁶ Obama's website stated: 'the Armenian genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence'.

⁷ Ali Babacan, the former Foreign Minister, told the Turkish parliament on 29 April 2009 that Obama's interpretation of the events of 1915 was 'unacceptable' as it lacked any reference, among other things, to the 'several hundred thousand Turks' who also lost their lives.

The taboo in Turkey on questioning the official version of what happened has gradually given way to a more open and sober debate. An important crack in the wall was the holding of the first conference in Turkey in September 2005 to debate the fate of the Ottoman Armenians, which went ahead, despite stiff opposition, including an attack on the organisers by Cemil Çiçek, the Justice Minister in the former government of the Justice and Development (AKP) party and now the Deputy Prime Minister, who accused them of 'stabbing the Turkish people in the back'.

A turning point came in January 2007 when the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, editor of the weekly newspaper *Agos*, was murdered in front of his office in Istanbul. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets chanting 'we are all Armenians' (Dink has been put on trial in 2002 for stating at a conference 'I am not a Turk... but an Armenian from Turkey').

Nevertheless, the official version is still being heavily propagated in some quarters. In February 2009, Turkey's Ministry of Education sent a circular reminding schools to show a documentary, '*Sari Gelin (Yellow Bride) – The True Story*', first aired in 2003 by state television (TRT) and report back. In six 40-minute episodes, it sets out the case that Armenians were responsible for their own destruction through subversion and rebellion. In one scene Turkish villages recall 'children were cooked over the fire... women were forced to eat their husbands'. Serdar Kaya, a father of an 11-year-old girl, filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's office and the Ministry withdrew the documentary.⁸

At the same time, however, no legal action has been taken against the publication this year of the private diaries of Talat Pasha, an Ottoman leader during World War I and the main organiser of the 1915 Armenian policy, which showed he meticulously supervised the relocation of 935,367 Armenians, of whom he counted 90% as 'missing' by 1917.⁹

The essence of this issue boils down to what exactly constitutes genocide, a subject that is now much more studied by academics and which does not focus almost exclusively on the Holocaust. The starting point is the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. The Convention defines 'genocide' as:

'... any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'.

As the European Stability Initiative (ESI) points out there is now a considerable body of court cases, official declarations and academic studies applying this definition to both historical and contemporary events, for example for events in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983 and the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹⁰

⁸ See 'Turkish Children Drawn into Armenia Row', news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7956056.stm.

⁹ Murat Bardakçı (ed.), *Talat Paşanın Evrak-ı Metrukesi* ('The Papers Talat Pasha Left Behind'), Istanbul, 2009.

¹⁰ See p. 16 of *Noah's Dove Returns: Armenia, Turkey and the Debate on Genocide*, mentioned in the first footnote.

Among many reasons why the Turkish government will not accept the term genocide is that this could lay Turkey open to claims on territory and reparations. However, as this tragedy happened almost a decade before Turkey was created, the country today is not legally responsible for acts committed almost 100 years ago.

What is needed to get out of this minefield, as Christopher de Bellaigue suggests in his recent book is a 'vaguer designation for the events of 1915, avoiding the G-word but clearly connoting criminal acts of slaughter, to which reasonable scholars can subscribe and which a child might be taught'.¹¹

A way forward, as apparently agreed, would be to set up a Joint History Commission. In 2005, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's Prime Minister, suggested to the then Armenian President Robert Kocharian that the two sides submit the issue of 1915 to an independent commission of historians and experts which would delve into the archives of not only Turkey and Armenia but also in those of relevant third countries such as Russia, the UK, France, Germany and the US. But Armenia did not take up the offer. According to an article by Yücel Güclü, First Counsellor at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, 'without joint consideration of all evidence, the wounds of the past will not heal and, indeed, when an incomplete narrative enters the political realm, the consequences can be grave'.¹²

Conclusion: Turkey and Armenian both stand to gain from reconciliation. But old prejudices on each side die hard. Landlocked Armenia, dependent on rail and road connections through Georgia and its Black Sea ports, would gain access to the port of Trabzon if the border with Turkey was opened. Trade with Turkey would begin to flourish and foreign direct investment could rise from very low levels as Armenia's risk perception would be lowered. For Ankara, the opening of the border with Armenia (Turkey has seven frontiers) would complete its policy of 'zero problems with neighbours'.

The recommendations of the International Crisis Group, an NGO dedicated to conflict resolution, could, if followed quickly, lead to Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan attending the return football match in Istanbul between Turkey and Armenia.¹³ The ball is in both courts.

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¹¹ See p. 104 of *Rebel Land: Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples* by Christopher de Bellaigue, Bloomsbury, 2009.

¹² See 'Will Untapped Ottoman Archives reshape the Armenian Debate?' by Yücel Güclü in the spring 2009 issue of the *Middle East Quarterly* (www.meforum.org/2114/ottoman-archives-reshape-armenian-debate).

¹³ Basically, Turkey should 'avoid sacrificing implementation of the normalisation package to demand for immediate resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and withdrawal of Armenian troops from occupied territories in Azerbaijan; Armenia should 'avoid statements or international actions relating to genocide recognition that could inflame Turkish public opinion against the current process' and the US, Russian and French co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group should 'intensify their engagement until Armenia and Azerbaijan reach final agreement on the basic principles for a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict'.

Annex: Chronology of Turkey-Armenia Relations

1800-1923: Ottoman Empire collapses to one-quarter its size under onslaught from Russia, the UK and France and new Balkan states, forcing many Turks and Muslims to fall back on the land of modern Turkey. Between two and five million Turks and Muslims die in massacres and forced deportations.

1890-96, 1915-20: Massacres and uprisings involving Armenian Christians of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in what is now central and eastern Turkey. These included a massive First World War relocation of Armenians starting on 24 April 1915, during which about one million persons were massacred or died of disease. Armenians and many others describe this as the Armenian Genocide.

1921: Turkey, Soviet Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia sign the Treaty of Kars, establishing peace and today's borders between Turkey and the south Caucasus states, including Armenia.

1973-85: Armenian terrorists kill 30 Turkish diplomats and diplomatic staff and 26 others in 45 attacks around the world, seeking Turkish recognition of an Armenian genocide, reparations and territory.

1991: Turkey becomes the second state to formally recognise Armenian independence. A railway line open since 1980s between Kars and Gyumri begins to carry US-financed wheat to Armenia.

1988-92: Hostilities break out in Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan. Main fighting begins 1992. By a ceasefire in 1994, ethnic Armenian forces occupy at least one-eighth of Azerbaijan.

1992: Turkey ensures that both Armenia and Azerbaijan join the Istanbul-based Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

1993: As ethnic Armenian forces advance into Azerbaijan, Turkey closes the railway line that is its only transport link with Armenia.

1995: Turkey opens an air corridor over its territory to Yerevan.

1998: Robert Kocharian is elected President of Armenia, making genocide recognition a central part of his foreign policy.

2000: Draft US House of Representatives Resolution 596 calls on President Bill Clinton to use the term 'genocide' in characterising the 1915 events. A last-minute intervention by Clinton, arguing that it would damage US-Turkish relations, causes the bill to be withdrawn. Turkey protests by briefly imposing tougher visa restrictions on Armenians travelling to Turkey.

2001: Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) is established in Geneva, aiming to improve relations between Turkey and Armenia. Bilateral civil society projects blossom.

2008: Turkish President Abdullah Gül visits Yerevan upon invitation by the Armenian President Sarkisian to attend an Armenia-Turkey World Cup qualifier football match.

Source: *Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders*, Crisis Group Europe Report 199, 14 April 2009.